Bones
Brothers, Horses, Cartels, and the Borderland Dream
by Joe Tone
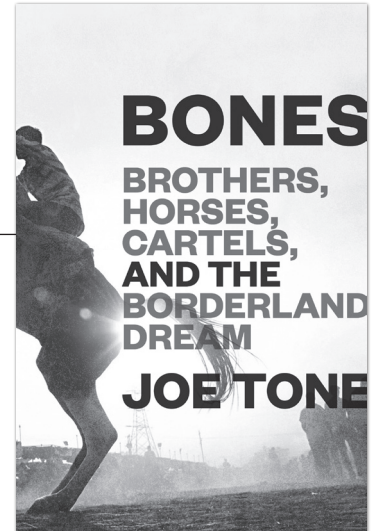
"The true-life tale of the Zetas' foray into quarter horses is masterfully recounted. . . . [a] finely-painted cast of characters . . . Tone weaves the threads together with skillful pacing and sharp prose, marking him as an important new talent in narrative nonfiction. . . . Tone adds some vivid details [and] digs deep into the colorful world of quarter-horse racing." —*The New York Times Book Review*

• about the book •

José was a devoted family man who cut no corners in his pursuit of the American dream. Born in Nuevo Laredo, a Mexican border town on a crucial smuggling route, José grew up loving the sprawling countryside and its tough, fast quarter horses, but in search of opportunity he crossed the border into Texas to look for work as a bricklayer. He kept his nose clean. He stayed out of trouble. Back in Mexico, José's younger brother Miguel was leading a different life. While José struggled to make ends meet, Miguel ascended to the top ranks of Los Zetas, a notoriously bloody drug cartel—his crimes had become the stuff of legend and myth on both sides of the border.

José, married with kids and now a U.S. citizen, gave every indication of rejecting his brother's criminal lifestyle. Then one day he showed up at a quarter-horse auction and bid close to a million dollars for a horse—the largest amount ever paid for a quarter horse at an auction. The humble bricklayer quickly became a major player in the quarter-horse racing scene that thrived in the American Southwest and Mexico. That caught the attention of an eager young FBI agent named Scott Lawson. He enlisted Tyler Graham, an American rancher who would eventually breed José's champion horse—nicknamed Bones—to help the FBI infiltrate what was revealing itself to be a major money-laundering operation, with the ultimate goal of capturing the infamous Miguel Treviño.

Joe Tone's riveting, exquisitely layered crime narrative, set against the high-stakes world of horse racing, is an intimate story about family, loyalty, and the tragic costs of a failed drug war. Compelling and complex, Bones sheds light on the perilous lives of American ranchers, the morally dubious machinery of drug and border enforcement, and the way greed and fear mingle with race, class, and violence along America's vast Southwestern border.

about the author

Joe Tone was most recently the editor of the award-winning *Dallas Observer*. He has written extensively about sports, crime, and immigration, among other topics, and has been honored for his investigative reporting, sportswriting, and narrative storytelling. His work has appeared in *The Washington Post*, *The Village Voice*, *LA Weekly*, and elsewhere. Tone holds a master's degree from the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University. He was born and raised in Northern California, and now lives in the Washington, D.C., area with his wife and two sons. This is his first book.

discussion questions

1. In the Prologue, we learn that José crossed the Mexican-American border effortlessly for four decades. According to the author, when and why did crossing become more complicated? Who would come to be "weaponized and dragged to the front lines of America's culture war" (5), according to the author? What does he mean by this? Do you agree with him? Discuss your answer.

2. What is quarter-horse racing? According to the author, when and where was the sport invented and who should be credited with its invention? Who historically participated in this sport and how did the sport evolve over time? How did quarter-horse racing come to be known as "the sport of cowboys"?

3. What was the bracero program and how did it affect the "culture of migration" (22)? What other legislation affected patterns of migration?

4. What effect did historical events such as the Great Recession and major droughts have on the ranching and horse-breeding communities? Why were brokers like Ramiro able to capitalize on these effects and events?

5. The author writes that José "possessed a deep sense of what social scientists call 'familism.'" What is "familism"? What evidence does the book provide to prove this assertion about José? According to the author, whom do social scientists "routinely pin that quality on," and why? Are there any examples of familism in the book that contradict this assertion?

6. In 2006, then-President Felipe Calderón accepted American aid for military training, equipment, and surveillance planes to help battle drug cartels. In taking American aid, what strategy does the author claim the Mexican government was implicitly accepting? Why does Tone describe the aid program as "Sisyphean" (41)? What approach could have been more impactful? What does Tone claim stymied this possibly more impactful approach?

7. What "epic odyssey" (52), according to Tone, is more interesting than the journey of drugs from their place of origin to their end user? What is money laundering? Why is the first step of money laundering referred to as "placement" (54)? What makes it so difficult to convict someone of the crime of money laundering?

8. Explore the theme of legacy. What kinds of legacies are represented in the book? How motivated do the characters seem to be by the idea of legacy? Why is legacy such an important idea to them? What problems seem to arise for the people in the book in their attempts to secure or maintain their legacies? Who in the book has already achieved a legacy, and who is still seeking a legacy? What might this reveal about the attainability of legacy?

9. What is FMES, and who seems to suffer from it most? Examine the history of law enforcement in the United States as represented in the book. How do the various government agencies work together to identify, track, and capture criminals? Is the process successful and efficient? What observations does the book offer on the subject of the process of policing and drug-law enforcement?

10. Consider the theme of choice. How do people seem to become drawn into or connected to the cartels? Do they have a choice? Explain your answers. What does Lawson believe accounts for people's entry into this world? Would you say that the book supports or overturns the notion of "unquestionably bad people" (137) propagated by Lawson's hero, the former agent John Douglas? Discuss your answer.

11. Tone writes, "On both sides of the border, the drug war had constructed an implicit hierarchy of lives" (149). What does he claim this hierarchy is based on? Who were the most valuable figures in this hierarchy? Within this system, who, according to Tone, was "worth mourning upon death but not nurturing in life" (150), and who was considered the least valuable of all?

12. What does Tone mean when he writes that, for some, "risk is mitigated by their privilege" (156)? Who benefits from the privilege he refers to here, and what does this reveal about the relationship between race or social class and privilege in the United States?

13. What are implicit bias and unconscious bias? Does Lawson believe that he is susceptible to either? What effect do these concepts have on criminal investigations? Considering the list of those who were indicted, does it seem plausible that either implicit bias or unconscious bias was an issue? Why or why not? Were you surprised by the list of those who escaped indictment? What explanation is offered for why these particular people were not indicted like the rest of those involved? Do you believe that this is an acceptable explanation?

14. José says that he believed that he was living the American Dream. How did he seem to define the American Dream? What does the author mean when he writes that, "viewed from a wide enough lens, what José was doing . . . was supremely patriotic" (170)? Does Lawson share José's definition of the American Dream? Explain your answer. What messages or insights does the book ultimately seem to offer about this understanding of the American Dream?

15. In Chapter 20, Tone writes that, due to a drought, some ranchers were "trading an industry threatened by climate change for an industry happily married to it" (217). What does he mean by this? What other industry do some ranchers switch over to during this time of crisis? Why might that change of industry be a questionable or bad choice, as Tone himself suggests?

16. What does the book reveal about the role of journalism in mitigating the War on Drugs? What effects can journalism have on federal investigations and the capture of criminals? Are they primarily positive? Why is Lawson upset when he hears that a *New York Times* reporter is going to write a story about José's family and their cartel connections? Alternatively, what challenges do journalists face in trying to bring these stories to the public?

17. Tone writes that, as he researched the book, his view of José "began to muddle" (266). What does he mean by this? According to Tone, what "common experience" (266) do reporters delving into the War on Drugs fall prey to? He claims that Lawson's "view of things was muddled, too" (267). Why does he think this? What does author see as problematic with Lawson's "litmus test" (268)?

18. Who takes plea deals and who ends up on trial? For those who end up on trial, what is their defense? What points does the prosecution raise in trying to incriminate them? What sentences do those on trial ultimately receive, and what is your reaction to those punishments? Do you believe that the outcomes of the judicial cases discussed in the book were always just and correct? Explain.

19. At the heart of the book is the question of whether José is innocent or guilty. What questions does the author of the book ask about José as he considers the question of José's innocence or guilt himself? Is this question ever answered? What does the book—and your experience reading it—reveal about the ways in which we determine someone's innocence or guilt?

20. What effects does Lawson's work and the outcome of the trial have on cartel culture and the drug wars being fought in Mexico and the United States? What does Lawson say changes after the trial? Is he satisfied with the outcome? How does Lawson change personally as a result of his work on this case?

21. Evaluate the conclusion of the book. Were you surprised by Tyler's life after the trial? Why or why not? How do the final scenes of the book support or reinforce major themes and motifs that run throughout the entire story? Consider what the conclusion of the narrative suggests, for example, about the horse-racing and horse-breeding industries, the War on Drugs, the concept of legacy, and the process of obtaining justice.

about this guide's writer

JE BANACH is a senior member of the Resident Faculty in Fiction at the Yale Writers' Conference. She has written for PEN, *Vogue*, *ELLE*, *Esquire*, *Granta*, *The Paris Review*, *Electric Literature*, and other venues and was a longtime contributor to Harold Bloom's literary series. She is the author of more than sixty literary guides including guides to works by Maya Angelou, Salman Rushdie, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Haruki Murakami, and many others.